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## WATER ENOUGH FOR FISH, FARMS AND DRINKING? CON

### Let's make CalFed work -- not derail it from its mission

WHEN IT WAS REPORTED at a gathering of the nation's most prominent natural resource economists last summer that California was seriously considering the construction of new dams and reservoirs, the assembly broke into disbelieving laughter.

There is substantial reason for this incredulity. According to CalFed, the federal and state joint venture addressing California's water problems, new or expanded surface storage would be unaffordable to the interests most clamoring for it. The value of new water to agribusiness ranges from \$30 to \$100 per acre foot, while the price for new surface storage starts at \$1,000 and ranges to well over \$2,000 per acre foot. Conservation, recycling -- even desalination -- are much better bargains.

California has more surface storage -- reservoirs -- than any state in the nation. Within the Golden State, 1,400 dams already divert and capture an astonishing 60 percent of the state's annual runoff. Thus, we have already used the most economically viable sites. The remaining options provide far less return for the money.

Nevertheless, old ways of thinking die hard. For some, population-growth projections lead inexorably to one conclusion -- build more reservoirs. When CalFed rolls out its framework for a long-term plan for California today, new storage is expected to be an important aspect of the proposal. This is troubling for those who had hoped that CalFed could break new ground in this old debate.

There is no dispute that the Bay-Delta's ecosystem is in nearly total collapse. We have lost 98 percent of riparian habitat, and 95 percent of salmon-spawning habitat in the Central Valley, and 95 percent of tidal wetlands in the Delta. Except for the fall run, all runs of our native salmon are listed or considered for endangered species listings. Many less telegenic species are in trouble as well. The California fishing industry has been in a free fall for the past decade, losing approximately 75 percent of its fleet due to declining fishing stocks. This decline has had traumatic economic impacts on the communities that service these mostly small, family businesses. And unlike farmers, fishermen have no federal aid or subsidy programs to fall back on.

These problems spawned the CalFed effort more than five years ago. CalFed has been an extraordinary enterprise, begun with great vision, boldly breaking down barriers between governmental agencies and willing to ask hard questions. But the test of its success is not in the pledges that will be made at today's media event -- everyone wants a healthy environment -- but how well CalFed can come through on those pledges.

CalFed deserves credit for proposing an ambitious fishery restoration program, but plans do not execute themselves. Without a serious political commitment to provide the water necessary for salmon over time, we could end up with another failed and very costly effort, primarily on the public's dime. CalFed must provide substantial new water for the environment beyond that necessary to merely keep the salmon teetering on the brink of extinction. Only by providing the water needed to restore the state ecosystem to health can we break the cycle of crisis management that creates uncertainty for both fish and farmers.

In addition, CalFed may bow to extreme pressure exerted by developers and agribusiness to press ahead with new dams and reservoirs. New dams cost billions in tax payer subsidies, destroy habitat and will undermine our ability to restore fisheries. Mountains of evidence establish that reservoirs and salmon do not mix well. Water for farms and cities can be achieved far more reliably, and inexpensively, through options compatible with fish and wildlife -- conservation, water transfers and innovative technologies.

Three arguments are employed to allay concerns about new dams, none of them compelling. First, advocates insist that new facilities will be "off-stream" and therefore will not harm the environment. But an "off-stream" reservoir is simply a siphon on a smaller stream, like the immense, 2.027 million acre-foot San Luis Reservoir. Off-stream storage can do tremendous damage by taking water out of the ecosystem. Second, they argue that water will only be taken during peak flows when it will not harm fish. But our existing system of dams already does this so efficiently that few peak flows remain.

Finally, some within CalFed insist that new storage will benefit fish. The Trinity Dam was built expressly to ensure the "preservation and promulgation of fish and wildlife" in the river and only surplus flows were supposed to be diverted. But the project has been an ecological disaster. Virtually all of the water was diverted for farms and the fish population in the Trinity River declined by 73 percent. CalFed has yet to prove that dams benefit fish.

California is bumping up against reality: we have finite water -- we do not create more by building more reservoirs. At best, the projects proposed might generate limited new supply for development and agribusiness at exorbitant cost and will likely exacerbate our already critical ecological problems. Talking about restoring the Bay-Delta ecosystem while undermining it will ultimately only hurt those so anxious to deprive the fish of their water. A healthy ecosystem is key to the economic well-being of all Californians.

California can have it all -- robust farming and economic growth without pushing its salmon, and fishing industry, into extinction. But we cannot do so by turning back to the solutions of the last century, or by failing to learn from our past mistakes and by making promises that cannot be kept. CalFed presents an extraordinary opportunity to rebuild some of what has been destroyed. We should seize it.

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